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C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 001147

STATE PASS TO CWAITE/ISN
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DEPT OF ENERGY PASS TO KEAPT/NNSA

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TAGS: ENRG TRGY KNNP PREL IAEA AG
SUBJECT: NUCLEAR ENERGY IN ALGERIA: U.S. COOPERATION BEGINS

REF: A. STATE 110196
B. 07 ALGIERS 1764

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4 (b), (d), (e) and (f).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Even as countries such as France, Russia, China and Argentina have pursued nuclear cooperation agreements with Algeria, Algerian experts and French diplomats say Algeria is still 20 to 30 years away from developing nuclear power. A team of experts from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) began collaboration with the Algerian atomic regulatory agency, COMENA, on October 12, in a follow-on program to the Sister Lab agreement signed in 2006. Representatives from the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) and the State Department's Office of Cooperative Threat Reduction also participated in the assessment visit, and discussed other avenues of cooperation with the Algerians, including the State Department's Nuclear Security Assistance Program (NSAP). The Algerians were eager to develop a work plan for future phases of LLNL's engagement in the area of radiation protection and health physics, while the Algerians also expressed interest in other avenues of assistance, particularly in the area of medical treatment. Algeria has two small research reactors, but also imports the radioactive material needed for its research and medical applications. COMENA currently regulates all uses of radioactive materials in Algeria, but new legislation being drafted with guidance from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would create a new, independent regulatory body. END SUMMARY.

NEW USG ENGAGEMENT ON NUCLEAR SCIENCE

12. (U) A team of experts from LLNL visited Algeria October 12-15 to begin a collaboration project with COMENA in the area of radiation protection and health physics. This technical assistance program, which may last as long as two years, follows the signing of a Sister Labs agreement in 2006 and two visits to the U.S. by COMENA officials and researchers earlier this year. Joining the LLNL team was a specialist from the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) and a program manager from the State Department's Office of Cooperative Threat Reduction, both of whom were here to gauge the Algerians' interest and capacity in other areas of civilian nuclear cooperation. The Algerians were very receptive both to the LLNL team and to the suggestion that Algeria could benefit from the State Department's

Nuclear Security Assistance Program (NSAP) regarding other opportunities for scientific cooperation.

13. (C) Algeria has two small research reactors, one Chinese-built and the other from Argentina. The team from LLNL told the Ambassador that it was unlikely that they or other USG-sponsored experts would provide technical assistance to the Algerians regarding reactor safety because the Algerians seem to be getting all the support they needed from the reactors' manufacturers. COMENA's director of cooperation told us that the Algerians run the reactors only part-time -- three days a week on average -- largely because the amount of nuclear material needed for research, medical and commercial use in Algeria does not warrant full-time operation of the reactors. Instead, the Algerians import radioactive matter for domestic use under the authorization and regulation of COMENA. The COMENA official told us that the Algerians have agreements with mostly European suppliers to return radioactive waste materials after use, and that state airline Air Algerie has a special "hot zone" at the international airport to store and handle such materials safely. He noted that while Algeria has not yet exported spent fuel from its reactors, it may explore that option "in the future."

NO NUCLEAR POWER IN NEAR-TERM

14. (C) At the outset of the visit, COMENA Commissioner Mohamed Derdour confirmed what was reported in ref A regarding Algeria's plans for the development of nuclear power. Derdour told us that Algeria remains 20 to 30 years from the development of nuclear energy, an assessment shared with us by French diplomats in Algiers after the recent visit of French Prime Minister Francois Fillon. This tracks with previous statements made by Energy Minister and OPEC President Chakib Khelil, who last year told UNVIE Ambassador Schulte that Algeria was not interested in rushing into nuclear power for a number of reasons, but instead would concentrate on its natural gas reserves and the development of renewable energy such as solar power (refs A and B). On October 19, the next Algerian ambassador to the United States, Abdallah Baali, told the Ambassador that Algeria had not yet taken the political decision to pursue nuclear energy. He said the priority was to pass and implement legislation to regulate a nuclear industry, before deciding over time if it made practical sense to build reactors for power generation. COMENA's cooperation director told us on October 12 that such legislation is currently being reviewed within the energy ministry. He said the legislation was drafted on IAEA models, and would create an independent nuclear regulatory agency, leaving COMENA to encourage and manage the development of nuclear research and applications.

MOVEMENT ON ADDITIONAL PROTOCOL AND ALGERIAN PRIORITIES

15. (C) The LLNL and NNSA team told the Ambassador that they were confident about the direction their radiation protection and health physics cooperation program with the Algerians was headed. They said that the Algerians were very open to expanding cooperation into other areas, which might ultimately lead the Algerians to sign the Additional Protocol and participate in the State System of Nuclear Material Accounting and Control (SSAC). (Note: Amb. Baali similarly told the Ambassador that he believed Algerian signature of the Additional Protocol was possible. End note.) The LLNL team added, however, that they would probably not be able to assist the Algerians in some of their priority areas, particularly in the field of medical physics. The team had the experience and capacity to help the Algerians develop their ability to protect individuals and populations from accidental or stray release of radio-isotopes, but not to work with them on medical treatment using radio-isotopes. The Algerians are significantly increasing their cancer-fighting capacity with a plan to open 30 new cancer therapy centers. The LLNL team may suggest American professional associations with experience and capacity to

advise the Algerians on medical physics; the Algerians have already interacted with one such group.

COMMENT: WHO'S COURTING THE ALGERIANS?

¶6. (C) This U.S. engagement is important not only because of the sensitive subject matter, but because we have seen a marked increase in international interest in working with the Algerians on the peaceful use of nuclear power. Not only did President Bouteflika discuss the issue during his visit Iran earlier this year, but the COMENA officials told us that Algeria has signed an umbrella agreement on the peaceful use of nuclear power with the government of China, and a more specific cooperation agreement between the two nations' energy agencies. Likewise, the French signed an overarching agreement here this year, but have not yet negotiated the more specific cooperation agreement. COMENA's cooperation director told us the Russians remain very interested but no agreements have been reached, and that Algeria is also discussing nuclear cooperation with Argentina and with South Korea. We plan to continue pursuing new avenues of nuclear cooperation with COMENA and the energy ministry, and believe strongly that the attention of the Department of Energy, Department of State, and perhaps health-related agencies like

the National Institutes of Health should be brought to bear on this new opportunity for bilateral nuclear engagement.

¶7. (U) The LLNL team members did not have the opportunity to clear this cable.

DAUGHTON

NNNN

End Cable Text